

When Staying Home Doesn't Mean Skipping Class

By JANE VARNER MALHOTRA

Despite the provision of universal, free public education for American children, more parents are opting to teach their kids at home.

As the sun rose slowly one December morning, so did my children. We were in no hurry. Although schools were in session, our school had moved to a new and convenient location: home. No rush to pack the lunches, find the backpacks, sign the permission forms, comb the hair, buckle everyone in the car, and beat the traffic to beat the school bell.

"What are we doing today?" Mabel asks.

"Studying earthquakes," answers her elder sister, Helen.

"And hiking the fault line," adds Zoe with a nod.

We'd recently moved our family of six to California. With little time to research which neighborhoods offered the best schools, and a reluctance to enroll our children at a school in the middle of the academic term, we decided to try homeschooling. We knew others who homeschooled and the whole-family benefit of learning together appealed to us. We would have more flexibility to explore our beautiful new community together, with the Pacific Ocean, San Francisco, Monterey Bay and the redwoods of the Santa Cruz Mountains within easy reach. Oh, and the San Andreas Fault that is blamed for so many of California's earthquakes.

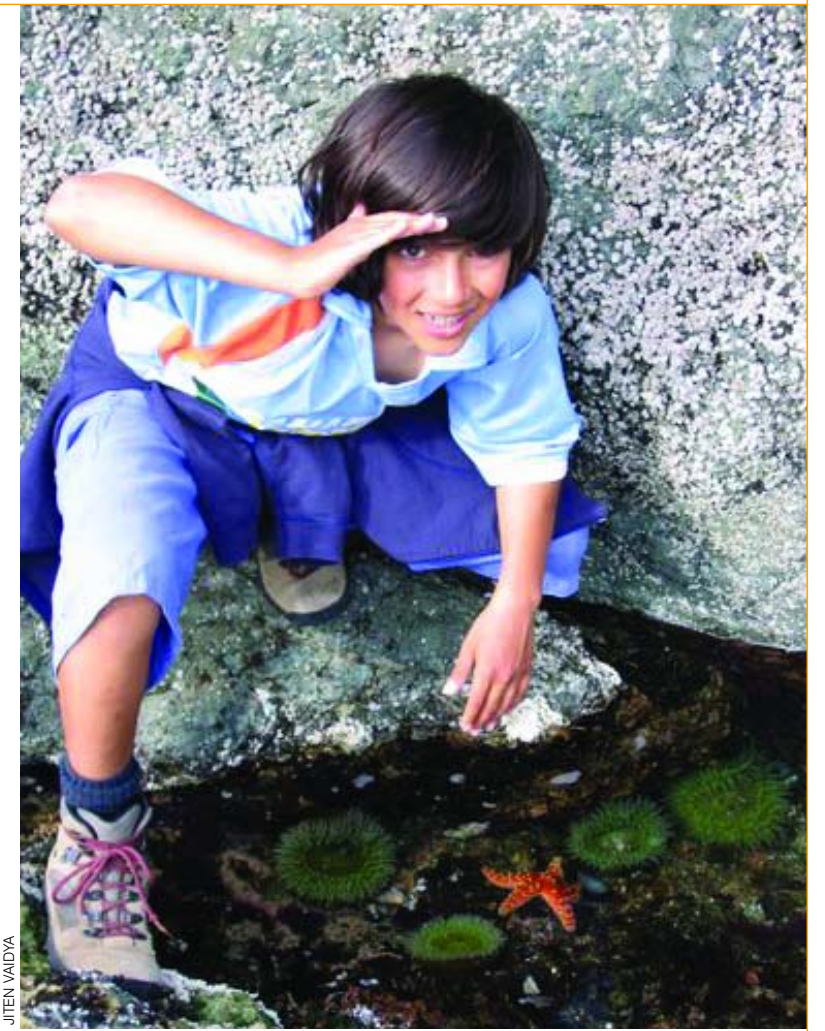
A growing number of families in the United States are choosing to educate their children at home. According to

Left top: Amit Malhotra and his children hike to the ancient petroglyphs in Phoenix, Arizona, as part of a study unit on desert life.

Far left: The Malhotra children play outside the public library in Santa Clara, California.

Left: Maya Jain and Zoe Malhotra join other children on a wagon ride through the Saratoga, California, orchards during the town's annual Mustard Festival.

Right top: Alicia and Jiten Vaidya's son discovers starfish and anemones in the tidepools near Mendocino, California.
Right: Diane Toler, director of the Catholic Homeschoolers of New Jersey, works with her children Joshua (from left), Alexandra, Michael and John at their home in Cherry Hill.



JITEN VAIDYA



DANIEL HULSHIZER © AP/WIDEWORLD



Photographs by JANE VARNER MALHOTRA





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a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education, an estimated 1.5 million school-aged children (between 5 to 17 years) were being homeschooled in 2007, an increase of 412,000 since 2003. Current figures are estimated at closer to 2 million. Parents who were surveyed cited the desire to provide religious or moral instruction as the most important reason for homeschooling, with concern about the school environment the second most important reason. Other reasons included dissatisfaction with the academic instruction at other schools, interest in a nontraditional approach to education and children with special needs. In a similar report in 2004, parents had cited concern about the school environment as the main reason for homeschooling.

The typical American child attends a free, neighborhood public school offering education in grades kindergarten through 12 (usually between 5 to 18 years). All children are legally required to attend school—public, private or home school—with specific regulations varying by state. The state, county, city or local school district governments establish curricular guidelines, number of days in a school year, teacher salaries and other particulars. The quality of a public school education changes dramatically between states and even within cities and neighborhoods. Often the better performing schools are found in wealthier communities where more local tax dollars are spent on education, and housing prices tend to be

higher due to demand.

While interest in homeschooling in the United States is growing, controversy about it abounds. Anti-tax and anti-government individuals often choose to homeschool their children to maintain independence from publicly supported institutions like schools. Some religious fundamentalists prefer to raise their children in an isolated, protective environment at home, and critics argue that without exposure to the ideas of others, those children are receiving a narrow education. Concerns have been raised about whether girls in such families are being as well educated as the boys and whether they learn of the full options available to them in life as American citizens. Lawmakers prefer some level of oversight in the interests of the children, while home educating parents maintain their freedom to teach their children according to their own values.

For many Americans, homeschooling is not a practical alternative for their family. Single-parent families or those with two working parents may have trouble finding time to eat with their kids, let alone teach math or science. Of the homeschoolers polled by the Department of Education in 2003, more than half had two parents in the household and just one parent in the labor force. Amy Thompson, a mother of five in Washington, D.C., sends her children to the neighborhood public school, but understands the appeal of homeschooling for some. “I support the fact that parents have

Above left: Colin Schiessle (right) plays with a calculator while his sister, Amber, works on a painting at their home in St. John, Indiana.

The children learn through a branch of homeschooling called unschooling.

Above center: Andrew Odor (left) studies math while his brother, Jarred, works with their mother, Karen, in Groton, Connecticut. Karen Odor is a coordinator of the Christian Homeschoolers Organization of Southeastern Connecticut.

Above right: Beverly Hartley and her son, Harrison, use their kitchen as a homeschooling classroom at their home in Burbank, California.

the right to homeschool, but there should be some accountability,” she notes. “Some people say that homeschool kids have trouble socializing, but my brothers both homeschool their children and they interact with other families all the time. It just takes more effort from the parents to find opportunities for their kids to meet others, compared to a neighborhood school that comes with a built-in community.”

Her husband, David, is an employee of the public schools. “He is committed to supporting the public schools, and is not a fan of homeschooling,” she says. “We believe that a good public school offers the best choice for our family. But it’s important for the parents to be involved in their children’s school, know the teachers, and have a sense of what is going on in the classroom and on the playground, too. We have made it a priority to impart our values on our children, and spend as much time

with them outside of school as we can. These are some benefits of homeschooling but you can manage them and still enjoy the benefits of public schooling. Plus, I can see that our kids have a certain level of resilience and independence that comes from navigating their way in school.”

It is notable that the relatively few families in India that have chosen to homeschool give the same reasons as their American counterparts—their dissatisfaction with the atmosphere in schools. In online chat forums they complain about bullying, bad peer influence, excessive scholastic pressure and insufficient creative outlets.

“The reason for homeschooling that was most frequently cited as being applicable was concern about the environment of other schools including safety, drugs or negative peer pressure,” said the U.S. Department of Education report in 2004. “Eighty-five percent of homeschooled students were being homeschooled, in part, because of their parents’ concern about the environment of other schools.”

Jennifer Glaese, who relocated to the United States in 2007 after several years in Germany, expressed disappointment with her children’s first year at their neighborhood public school in Hendersonville, North Carolina. “There’s no art education in the elementary schools and no languages offered until high school. Both of my children are bright and I noticed how much of their day was spent doing busy

work, standing in lines, going to the bathroom, waiting for children who do not understand a concept to catch up before the rest of the class can move on. Plus there was little or no time for recess!”

This year she and her German husband

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have decided to homeschool their 11-year-old son and 8-year-old daughter, along with several other families in their community. Five years ago, living in Vermont, they homeschooled their son for first grade and found the experience rewarding. “We believe we can offer our children a better learning environment and richer opportunities to know themselves as whole beings—incorporating the mind, body and the spirit of who they are,” Glaese says.

Jiten Vaidya, a father of two in Sunnyvale, California, was apprehensive when his wife, Alicia, first suggested they homeschool their son. “For a lot of Indian families in the U.S., education is considered very important—close to people’s hearts. Respect for the teacher, guru knows

best—these values in the Indian culture made it a challenge for me to believe that I knew better than the teachers, that I knew what was best for my kids.”

Looking back seven years later, he knows they made the right choice, even if it was a decision he would revisit each year. “I myself was taught to read at home by my mother, and I did a lot of early arithmetic on my own. So for our son’s early years I believed there was no reason to be conventional. As each year passed, I could see how much he was learning. He is curious, lively, engaged. He is relaxed—not on somebody else’s schedule. Eventually I came around to thinking homeschooling would work, and now I have no misgivings.”

The biggest reward for Vaidya? “The opportunity to know and connect with your child.”

A high school teacher by training and homeschool mother of four, Amy Chesser of Champaign, Illinois, agrees. When her 8-year-old son broke down one summer day with anxiety about school starting again, she sat with him and listened. “He was bored at school, frustrated with waiting for other kids, upset and distracted by frequent teasing. I’d worked as a fourth-grade substitute teacher the previous year, and even in the structured classroom of a great school, these things happen.” Several families in her church community homeschooled, as did her sister-in-law. After reading about it, she became excited. “I

wanted to be with my children, to learn with them, and to help my son love learning," she says.

Although she would not describe religion as the main reason she chose to homeschool her children, her faith plays a role for her on a personal level. "God gives me the *courage* to homeschool," she explains.

Taking on full responsibility for your children's education definitely requires courage. Many states require more, such as registration with the local school district, maintaining attendance records and a portfolio of work samples, annual testing for the children, progress review by a certified educator, and a high school diploma for the primary educator. In Vermont, considered to be among the more restrictive states, the home study statute outlines an annual progress assessment required of each homeschooling family for at least two years. If the students demonstrate adequate progress during the first two years, families no longer have to undergo the assessment, which consists either of a completed standardized test, a report from a licensed teacher in Vermont, or a report from the parents or instructor along with a portfolio demonstrating the student's progress in each subject area. In New Jersey, with minimal regulations regarding homeschooling, a child is exempt from compulsory education as long as the child is receiving "equivalent instruction" elsewhere, including at home. However, if a local school board has credible evidence that the child is not receiving this equivalent instruction, then the board may bring charges against the parent or guardian for not educating the child.

According to Chesser, "Illinois requires no paperwork or testing—at this time." In North Carolina? For Glaese, the process was straightforward: "You simply go to the Web site of the state's division of non-public education, fill out a form and send it in to them. They okay it, send you an acceptance letter back, and you are homeschooling!" In our case, following California law, we registered online as a private school located in our own home, with three school-aged children in attendance. We set up record-keeping of the children's progress and the hours spent in

instruction, and we reviewed the state's broad curricular guidelines for each child's grade level. We joined a homeschool co-op and a park group to find other families and share ideas about alternative education resources in our community.

At our first park day, we met families with Ivy League-educated parents and former public school teacher parents now leading their own, small, home classrooms. Public schools' emphasis on standardized testing was a common concern among the former teachers. We discussed the ins-and-outs of homeschooling in California, a state considered friendly to alternative education. Some parents chose to work through their school district's independent study programs, which enabled them to be eligible for free curricula, two-hours-a-week group class time for their children, and in some cases, a stipend toward approved courses or materials. Some parents opposed this formula, preferring complete independence from government support or control. Some of the families adopted the unschooling approach to educating their children: letting the children direct their learning based on their own random interests, with parents simply facilitating or supporting along the way. Two of the families used a strictly structured approach, with formal daily lessons in advanced math, Latin, robotics, piano, etc. Two other families were something in between, which is where we found ourselves over the course of the year, shifting slightly as we learned, accommodating life's other demands, and embracing the concept of learning by doing, with a heavy emphasis on field trips.

Earthquakes were new to me and we spent that December morning learning all about them, on the United States Geological Survey Web site. We could track California quakes with the click of a button, compare strengths, locations and frequency,

and observe what constitutes merely a quarry explosion. After much discussion of plate tectonics, we reviewed what to do when the earth inevitably shifted in our new home. "Don't panic!" said the state-issued safety guide. I assured my children that I would indeed panic, so they must be responsible for whatever practical steps that followed, like "get under a table." We then enjoyed a beautiful hike along the fault near Palo Alto with another homeschooling family whose dad was involved in the Sierra Club environmental group. The Los Trancos Trail offered interpretive markers explaining how to identify various geological clues to earthquake activity in the area. Our friend and his children also taught us how to identify local flora, cougar and coyote tracks, and scat (a favorite).

We usually spent mornings at home and afternoons out exploring and enjoying the company of friends. A typical day included plenty of time to read, some time writing or drawing in journals, and a more structured math lesson from our books we'd saved from the start of the school year, when the kids were enrolled in the traditional school on the East Coast. Afternoons included hiking, museum visits, park days and classes at a homeschool community center on subjects like sign language and the martial art of Aikido.

"A typical day for our son begins with reading," explains Alicia Vaidya. "After breakfast, he'll do a couple hours of math. Now that he is 11, he's mostly self-directed and he has the answer key. Periodically I'll have him check his answers, and every week I go through a problem with him. He'll ask me if he comes across ones he doesn't know how to solve. We follow the math system used in Singapore. He then has lunch and we do one other subject like science, writing or history. He loves music and practices piano an hour a day. Then we head to either music or dance lessons, and three afternoons a week we go to the park with friends." She agrees that getting to spend time with your children is a great benefit of homeschooling. Keeping them away from the worries of bullying that often takes place at school is another incentive. But mostly she wants her children to be

challenged. "I don't believe in sugar-coating learning. If the material is interesting in and of itself, you don't have to make it interesting."

Chesser purchased a structured curriculum the first year, but by the second year, "The kids were figuring out their passions and we let that guide them. My son was a reluctant reader in school. Now he loves to read. He has time, it's relaxed, and he reads books that he likes. He's curious. He wants to learn, versus school where he had to learn to make good grades."

Her 8-year-old daughter has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. "At home, she doesn't have to feel bad that she's moving all the time. She has Play-Doh (modeling clay) to hold while we read. As a professional teacher, I know that if she were in a traditional school setting, they would expect us to medicate her. By teaching her at home, we've been able to avoid medication. She's smart, she loves learning, she's very creative. She likes to *do*. She attends art class with a wonderful teacher and she won first place at a university-sponsored art festival this spring."

Chesser's son enjoys a small, group math class taught by a retired University of Illinois professor. "He encourages us to pay bills with the kids, have them experience math through regular life. I have my son estimate the total of our grocery bill as we go through the store. It also helps give him an appreciation for how much things cost.

"I try to get good, thoughtful moments with my children each day. I also remember what it was like as a teacher, trying to do that with 20 or 30 kids in a classroom. It's not possible," she says.

As the children enter upper grades, questions about graduation emerge. How does a family decide when a child is "finished" learning? Graduation from home-educated high school varies according to state regulations, but in most cases, homeschooled high school graduates are treated like small, private schools, and a high school diploma is issued by the school administrators. In a

Andrea Moore and her daughter, Emily, fly a kite as part of recreation with other members of a homeschooling group in South Carolina.

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homeschool, that would be the parents. For example, in Colorado there is no state diploma, and local school-district diplomas are only given to students who attend the public high school. Parents create their own diplomas to give to their children upon completion of their homeschool program. General Education Development tests, commonly taken by adults who do not have high school diplomas in order to establish that they have high school level academic skills, are not required of homeschool graduates in Colorado.

Colleges require a transcript of some kind, listing which courses the student has taken, the number of "credit hours" and the grades. Standardized test scores, interviews

and recommendations are also important. With homeschool students, colleges are less concerned about grades and more interested in what the applicant studied and how the subject was learned, which families typically demonstrate through a portfolio. In an article in the *Boston Globe*, Williams College Associate Director of Admissions for Operations Connie Sheehy explains, "We read home-scholars' applications just like any other application. They don't get any special consideration, but they're not discriminated against, either. Their applications are interesting, and they've certainly done independent work their whole lives." While the Department of Education's 2003 study did not track information about university attendance by homeschool graduates, college admissions offices report a growing number of homeschool applicants. Harvard University describes itself as "homeschool friendly," yet would not make available any statistics regarding the number of homeschool students admitted annually.

The Vaidyas' son entered 6th grade at a carefully-selected private school this fall, where his parents believe he will be in a cooperative, supportive and academically challenging environment. He is looking forward to participating in the orchestra.

In Illinois, Chesser plans to continue homeschooling a few more years, when she'll ask her son if he'd like to return to traditional school. "There are some things you miss by not going to public school," she admits. "But I'll leave it to him to decide."

After that first year of homeschooling, we found a public parent-participation school for our children that mirrored the values we sought to instill, embracing whole-child learning, supporting learning by doing, and offering lots of venturesome field trips where the children do much of the planning themselves. Now back on the East Coast, our children are in their old neighborhood school again. For our family, homeschooling challenged all of our beliefs about traditional education, and stretched my understanding of why and how we learn.

Jane Varner Malhotra is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.

